



The RIAS Amadeus Quartet Beethoven Recordings

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Best recordings of 2013

As part of their excavating activities at the RIAS tapes, the Audite label has now come up with a very nearly complete* Beethoven string quartet cycle from the famed, great Amadeus Quartet, recorded between 1950 and 1967**. In a sense this is hardly a re-release, but a first-time-ever issue on CD. Still, a half-century old recording seems a better fit under re-issues, so here it is.

What makes the set stand out is the Amadeus Quartet's complete command of that chamber-music feel: the musicians—headed but not dominated by Norbert Brainin—become one organism that finds its expression through Beethoven (in this case). The fact that each movement of every work has been recorded in one continuous take only helps with this impression of a continuous arch and development. Warmth and an eager tension are combined to great results, leaving plenty younger interpretations that take the either athletic-Olympic approach or a merely beautiful one well behind.

There's no need to pretend that many modern string quartets haven't even greater technical mastery today. Or that recording quality hasn't considerably improved*** (admittedly pointless when it's voided via mp3 or poor streaming). Or that there aren't select quartets which have just as much artistic and musical urgency and expressiveness. The qualities that make the Amadeus Quartet in Beethoven great are still most appreciable today: Among the great historic cycles, this is one that Beethoven lovers will immediately embrace alongside the first Budapest and second Végh cycles (more of the latter soon or above) as their go-to choices for old-world nostalgic beauty and musical insight.

* Only the "Harp Quartet" No.10, op.74 is missing, but to fill the void the String Quintet op.29 (with Cecil Aronowitz) is added. The Grosse Fuge is performed separately from op.130, as on their slightly later, fine but less vigorous, studio DG set.

** Really 1950 through 1962; only op.127 stems from 1967

*** The sound quality of these re-masterings off the original high speed analogue tapes are actually of superb quality and far better than anything one would ever expect from to hear from recordings that old.